

## A CAPITAL SKETCH.

## SO IT IS IN RUSSIA.

I resided in Russia many years, and I must, in justice, say that I thoroughly enjoyed my life in my capital. Business succeeded well, my wealth was accumulating rapidly, and I felt that there was no extravagance in having luxuries, nor in allowing my family to enjoy them. We entered freely into society, and the Russians always treated us with the greatest kindness. Our children were growing up; the eldest had been educated in London, and had spent her holidays at her grandfather's, in Kent. A short time before we had been surprised by learning that she had formed an attachment with a young neighbor of theirs, of good character.

As the season was almost too advanced for travelling, the young people petitioned that they might be married in England; and we at last consented, with the proviso that they were to pay us a visit in the following spring. I need not, however, dwell upon our family. The night I am about to speak of was in the depth of winter. Every thing was freezing, and only Russians would dream of parties in such weather; but it was the height of the season in St. Petersburg, and the party we gave that evening was expected to go off brilliantly. Our friends were invited to come in masquerade, and we begged our intimates to disguise themselves effectually. Our rooms were already crowded, when a stranger, or at least a strange figure, addressed me, saying he was obliged to leave early, and he trusted I would follow his example in returning home; he hoped he should not see me again.

I was astonished by the odd address. At first I thought he must have imbibed too freely of the sparkling wine in the refreshment saloon; but then I remembered that they would hardly have been opened. Just then Count Vladimir came up and put his hand upon my shoulder, saying—

"I should scarcely trouble to carry a mask in my hand, if I were you; for every one has seen your face, so that you cannot disguise yourself, even if you put it on. Pray! why are you looking so mysterious?"

I repeated the words of my visitor, and said I could not forget them, although I knew they were of no consequence.

"I disagree with you," remarked my friend. "Those words must have been intended as a warning. I know that you have done many kindnesses to our people, and one of them has wished to put you upon your guard."

"Oh! nonsense," I answered; but the Count persisted. He reminded me that he had known and liked me for years, and he earnestly begged me to act upon the warning. At any rate, he found that there were grounds for his suspicions, that I would promise to act upon his advice.

"Very well," I said, and turned away. In half an hour's time I met my friend, who whispered that he wished me to join him in the library, which we found deserted.

"My fears have been corroborated," said the Count; "you are suspected, and will be regarded to-morrow, or at any moment, if you show signs of departure. You must quit St. Petersburg to-night!"

"Nonsense!" I again repeated; "you do not suppose that I will leave my wife and children on the whispered joke of some scoundrel, perhaps."

"I do not wish you to leave your wife and children," answered the Count; "but you must go with you, or possibly you may all be on the road to Siberia before you are aware, and it will be small comfort to you to know that you have done nothing wrong, and that perhaps, in twenty years, you may be acquitted. Be warned in time by a sincere well-wisher."

The Count's argument had some effect, and I inquired what had best be done.

"But first order the people to pack up the furniture of the house, and have both wine and the brandy included; then quietly tell your wife to collect her trunks, and counsel them to join her person—the opportunity is wearing her diamonds; then return, and we will change dresses."

This was soon done. My poor wife was one of those valuable women who could take a hint without stammering or hesitating. In a long while, I persuaded Count Vladimir as well as I was able, wearing the mask tightly fastened, as you may suppose.

The next time we met, my kind friend told me that his carriage was both warm and large, and well supplied with furs, as they had a long drive from their country-seat. He thought our best plan would be to enter it as if we were leaving the party, get fresh horses at Iversky, and reach the frontier with speed; whilst he and his wife would personate us as long as they could.

"But if there is any risk, you will be more likely to suffer than a foreigner."

"Excuse me," he answered; "the Countess is nearly connected with the Empress, and a favorite at Court; and they could not allege that we had done anything worthy of blame, or surely you might pay me a visit in the country without committing a crime, as they had said, on oath, that I had no suspicion that you had been guilty of any crime to drive you from the country. On second thoughts, I think you had better leave your youngest child behind; he is too young to bear the journey, and I will promise that my wife will take the greatest care of him;—and now prepare your family with all haste."

I need scarcely say that Count Vladimir spoke English fluently, as Countess was of Russian birth, and he acted the part of host capitally; whilst I persuaded the girls that we intended to carry on the joke of our disguise, and would try and take the servants in when we arrived at Iversky, the country seat of Count Vladimir. My daughters were fortunately dressed as Poles, and their sable pelisses, which early in the evening they had deemed as nuisances, were well qualified for a journey; and a large domino concealed effectually the thick shawls which scarcely suited the embroidered velvet dress of my wife.

I lost no time in explaining matters to my family. My daughters could not believe their ears, whilst my wife seemed almost to regret that her darling Charley should be left to the mercy of Russian barbarians.

My thoughtful friend had furnished me with a note to the confidential attendant, and no sooner was it read than I left me, whilst we recruited ourselves with the hot supper provided for his master. On his return he urged us to start directly. The ladies were wrapped still more warmly in furs and hoods, whilst I had an immense fur coat assigned to me, the outside being of sheepskin. Emily, my youngest daughter, declared that I looked exactly like a polar bear raised upon his hind legs. But to our dismay we found that our extra wraps had so increased our size that it was next to impossible to wedge myself into the carriage. What was to be done? I began to take off my coat, but Vassilievitch objected—

"I would be sure to require it. Besides," he added, "would it not cause remark to see a carriage crowded to that extent with lords and ladies, and no servant to attend upon them? Could not my lord personate a servant, and stay outside the carriage?"

To this I agreed willingly. Vassilievitch told me that I would find pipes, tobacco, and cigars in the hamper, beneath the seat, and a few other things which I might require.

At last we were off at a rattling pace. The Count's horses were first-rate, and they were well driven; but the night grew colder and colder. Anxiety of mind seemed to have deadened my external feeling, and I only drew the want of heat beneath the seat, and the arrival at the post-stage to find four horses in readiness. The Count had ordered one of his people to ride on, and give notice of our coming upon business of importance. I had now recourse to the clearness beneath the seat, and a small lantern showed me a most heterogeneous mass of articles; a brace of pistols and ammunition were amongst the number, and thankful I was to see them, as I was determined to sell my wife dearly if we were pursued.

We continued our journey during the following day, the weather continuing fine though

cold. A great deal of snow had fallen during the past week, and the roads were heavy in consequence; towards night, the wind began to moan in a threatening manner. At the post house we were strongly recommended to remain all night, as the next stage was through a large wood which was frequented by wolves, and the innkeeper told us that several oxen had suffered from them, though he did not think that they would dare to attack a carriage. Time was too precious for us to spare it for rest; so I said we must continue our journey at all risks. Despatches of consequence were in the carriage. We hurried on, for the wolves were on all sides, making us feel most nervous. I was then told that we made but slow progress. At last we came to a dead stop. I disentangled myself as well as I was able from all my furs, and jumped to the ground. A tree had fallen down across the narrow road for us to pass it; so I said we must cut the top away. I saw that this must be a tedious business, and trembled for the result. The wolves seemed to be creeping nearer and nearer, and they must attack our horses at any moment. I took the hatchet from Ivan's hands, and begged him to look after his cattle; but I had soon to relinquish it, when I might answer the questions of the women. One of them was sure to ask me, "What is the matter?" I am afraid so," was the reply; "that is the reason we are so hurried about the tree; if we can only keep it at a distance till the passage is free, I have no fear."

"Make a fire," cried one of the girls; "that is the way they frighten lions and tigers."

"Yes, but lions and tigers usually reside in hot countries, where sticks are dry," answered I; "but I will speak to our driver about it."

I found him holding with difficulty the startled and frightened animal, and inquired whether a fire would be practicable.

"The best thing that can be done," said he; "get everything you can spare from the carriage, and if once you get a blaze, the fire will keep it off."

On telling the ladies, I found they were determined to be useful; so I left it to them, and worked hard at the tree, whilst Ivan instructed my daughters; the lid of a box and some straw were soon ignited, and not a bit too soon. The wolves had drawn so near that we could hear them snarling as they hustled one another. But my work was nearly done; the horses were fastened strongly to the trees, and Ivan assisted me in lighting the wood.

When once the road was clear, we started; my wife had given Ivan a bottle of brandy, and put another on my seat, and much we needed it, for the cold was intense. Before long, the driver told me one of his horses was lame; he could not keep up with the others. As our speed diminished, our enemies crept nearer. I thought of the mask I had kicked it under the seat, and I remembered the old school-boy dodge of frightening one's friends by putting a lighted match in their eyes. The half-starved brutes were startled; they could not make it out. The mask had fortunately fallen so that the light shone through the eyes and mouth, and I saw them stop; the foremost went up to it, and seemed afraid to touch it. But the wolves in the rear were impatient, and pushed the others on; one fell upon the mask, and evidently crushed the lantern, for the light went out, and again the wretches were pursuing.

"We cannot be saved," said Ivan, at length, "unless you can think of something else."

"If I had, but a rope," I shouted, "I might do something."

"Then catch this," he answered, and threw a good-sized piece over the top of the carriage; "I brought it in case the harness broke."

I pulled off my long boot which was lined with sheepskin, with a band over the round top, and, having fastened the rope, secured myself round the inside, that our hungry foes might mistake it for a trap. I then threw it over, and had the pleasure of seeing it bump most satisfactorily along, the wolves keeping at a most respectful distance. This continued for a minute or two, and then our lame horse fell.

"We must leave him," cried Ivan, jumping down as he spoke, and I followed his example, cutting the harness to shoot the lame horse off. "Have your pistols ready," said the Russian, "whilst I listen the traces—the wolves are upon us."

So it was. My boot no longer served to frighten them. It now lay quiet on the snow, and I had just time to turn and shoot the foremost as he was making a spring.

"Mount!" shouted the driver, and I sprang on to the step, managing to shoot an immense wolf who was rushing at one of the horses.

"We are free now," I said to Ivan; "the wolves will surely remain with the lame horse."

"Yes, I think we are," he answered; "but load your pistols if we do not reach the post-house before they overtake us we shall find them more savage than ever; that poor brute will not be a mouthful for each of them."

But at the edge of the wood we saw the walls of the post-house, just as the pack rushed into the brighter light. They felt they were fooled, and shrank away howling dismally. As to the ladies, they were really more dead than alive when we helped them out of the carriage, and we all agreed that we must take an hour's rest before we started.

As we reached the frontier another doubt arose. Our passports were *en route*, but I had them only for my wife, myself, and one of my daughters; they had been made out when we talked of joining my eldest daughter and her husband in Paris, and they were likely to be of service; but how was I to manage about Emma and Charley? After some deliberation I decided to consult our driver, who had behaved so well in our escape from the wolves. So telling the ladies that they might have a short rest at a comfortable little post-house which we had reached, I joined Ivan, offering him a share of my brandy-bottle, and asked him if he had not been long in the service of Count Vladimir.

"I was a serf, born on his land," was his reply; "and my father was before me."

"Is he not a good master?" I inquired.

"He is, indeed, my lord; for he persisted in calling me 'Ah! if all vassals were as fortunate as I have been, Russia would be a different country from what it is.'"

I said I believed his master trusted him, and I would do the same. I wanted to know what I had best do, as I had not passports for two of my daughters, and I dared not apply to the officials of the frontier town.

"If you would not be allowed to pass," he said; "but could you not get them across the river Memel, and then pick them up after going through the nearest town?"

"How do you mean?" I inquired.

"When we get to Meretch," Ivan answered, "I could turn aside, for I know the part quite well. The river must be frozen hard at this time, and I or my lord might take the young ladies over, leave them in a cottage close to the banks of the Memel, and then return to the carriage and drive to Meretch, where you can show your papers."

This plan I deemed feasible, although the idea of leaving two young ladies in the mercy of strangers was repugnant to my feelings. But when I told my daughters about it they both declared that they had no fear, and that they would much rather cross the ice than be on the banks of the river another difficulty arose. There was no passport for Ivan, and yet we were most unwilling to part from him.

"My lord must consent to act as driver," said Ivan; "and I can see the young ladies across the river, and protect them from danger if necessary. Or I can stay with the carriage, and on arriving at Meretch pretend to return to St. Petersburg, and seize the first opportunity of crossing the river."

The last plan would have taken too much time, so I told him we had full confidence in him, and promised him a handsome reward if we reached Paris in safety, and so we parted. We had not much trouble in Meretch. When I produced my passports, I said my business was of importance; an hour saved was sometimes worth a fortune to a merchant like me. We reached Paris in safety, and so we parted. We had not much trouble in Meretch. When I produced my passports, I said my business was of importance; an hour saved was sometimes worth a fortune to a merchant like me. We reached Paris in safety, and so we parted.

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When out of the town my heart bounded. We were once more free! I trusted to join the girls in an hour or so, and lost no time on the road; but the path was a winding one, and there were numerous cross-roads; however, I took the river as my guide, and in course of time we reached a cottage, but could hear nothing of our little party. Further on we met an old woman, who made us understand that she had seen two girls whom a Russian was taking before the authorities, as he feared they were spies. "But they looked both good and modest, and my heart ached for them," she added with a sigh. After giving her a trifle, we hastened on, and soon overtook my weary children. Ivan had seen some military resting in the cottage when he peeped in through the narrow window, and feared that unpleasant inquiries might be made, so he concocted this story, which he was sure would win the heart of any peasant.

The girls told me that the poor woman had been very kind; she had brought them black bread and cheese in her apron, and milk from her little dairy, though Ivan had pretended that he could not allow them to stop and rest. My daughters said they would never forget his kindness and thoughtfulness; and, indeed, he has proved a most faithful servant; he is now my gamekeeper, and his master thought it would be scarcely prudent for him to return to Vladimir.

A day later I could not have left the capital, for I should have been in prison; for the authorities had learned that I was connected with the English press. Nothing could be more absurd; but so it is in Russia.

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